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Differentiated Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Meeting the Diverse Needs of All Learners

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The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes. (Petras, 1995)

How can this profound quote by Marcel Proust help all of us metaphorically understand the powerful relationship of our minds, emotions, and bodies to our different ways of knowing; the varied paces at which we learn; and the input we need for motivation and success? As teachers, we continue to search and explore new ways to design and deliver instruction in order for our students to reach their learning potential, starting them from where they are and moving them forward on a learning continuum. But for many students, the traditional approaches to learning seem limiting, and many of them feel frustrated and discouraged. With the advent of studies in cognitive science and brain-based learning research along with the powerful advancement of technologies, we are beginning to unlock the mysteries of the human brain and its possibilities. Educational research also enables us to better identify learner variables that can affect a student's performance (Gregory & Chapman, 2002). We are starting to open our "new" eyes.

Our language classrooms are tapestries of the world around us. Students come to us with varying ability levels, a myriad of language and cultural backgrounds, an abundance of interests, and an assortment of learning profiles. These students need inspiring, engaging lessons that will permit them to reach their highest potential and meaningful tasks that are relevant both to them and to the world in which they live. They desire a supportive learning environment which promotes diversity, nurtures creativity, acknowledges that they learn at varied rates and in different ways, recognizes their strengths, and honors everyone's work. These students need variety, choices, challenges, complexity, and opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities. They need to experience differentiated instructional opportunities (Heacox, 2002).

What is Differentiated Instruction?

In a level one Spanish class, students want to find out more about the countries where Spanish is spoken, so the teacher provides a variety of resources (including sample texts, authentic documents, and Internet sites) that students can choose from in order to gather more in-depth information. In a level three Spanish class, students read and create a graphic representation (mind map) of an Aztec legend. Each student then chooses one other Aztec or Mayan legend to read and study from the four provided by the teacher. Grouped according to the legend each has chosen, students read and interpret it, then demonstrate their understanding of the legend and its connection to their own lives by creating a skit, designing a children's book, or inventing a product of their choice that will be presented to the class.

German II students are studying the weather. The teacher creates seven learning centers where students can practice various aspects of the weather unit, including listening activities, a video clip of a TV weather report, and German weather maps from a newspaper. Students then choose four of the seven centers that best help them use the weather unit and complete the activities at their chosen centers. After evaluating students' progress, the teacher determines that one third of the class knows the vocabulary, structure and culture for this unit very well and could easily perform the appropriate real world functions like helping a friend pack clothes for a trip to Austria. One third of the class understands *most* of the unit and has performed most of the interpersonal and interpretive tasks with just some difficulty. One third of the class is experiencing a considerable degree of difficulty and needs

more direct instruction and concrete examples. In order to provide challenging practice to all, the teacher tiers three different homework assignments from the book and ancillaries. Students do the assignment that best matches their readiness level.

All of the preceding activities and strategies are examples of differentiation. Differentiated instruction is a philosophy of teaching and learning which recognizes that each learner is unique. Rigorous, relevant, complex and flexible, differentiated instruction is a response to that uniqueness. Consequently, in a differentiated classroom, not every student is doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way at exactly the same time. However, differentiated instruction is not merely a set of strategies and activities that challenges the learner in a variety of ways, but rather a belief system that proclaims that learners—with all their diversity—come to our classes with potential ready to be tapped. Differentiation is an effective way for teachers to offer meaningful instruction delivered around challenging content and designed to meet the needs of students at their appropriate levels and to help them achieve maximum growth (Center for Advanced Student Learning, 2001).

A differentiated classroom offers a variety of learning options to tap into different readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. In a differentiated classroom the teacher uses (1) a variety of ways for students to explore curriculum content, (2) a variety of sense-making activities or processes through which students can come to understand or “own” information and ideas, and (3) a variety of options through which students can demonstrate or exhibit what they have learned (Tomlinson, 1995, p. 1).

When differentiated instructional strategies are used, there is more access to learning by more students, more effective use of time, and more evidence of motivated students. The art and science of teaching emerge (Tomlinson, 1999).

The Core of Differentiated Instruction

In order to prepare for differentiation, sound teaching principles must be honored and a quality curriculum must be in place. Applying standards while designing and organizing instruction, a teacher must be clear on what all students need to know, understand, and be able to do at the end of the unit. The teacher is familiar with student differences that affect the unit and builds on these differences, making adjustments in the *content* of the unit, the multiple ways students *process* the content, and the various *products* they create in order to demonstrate what they have learned. For example, a pre-test or a questionnaire can be used to check for prior knowledge of the content, student reflective logs can be examined to check for previous challenges, past grades can be used to determine progress and

readiness levels, a multiple intelligences checklist can be administered to check for varied learning profiles, or an inventory can be taken to determine interests. To enhance learning for all students, the goals of differentiated instruction include: establishing a balance between a student-centered and teacher-facilitated classroom, providing opportunities for students to work in a variety of formats, developing instruction around the standards and the “big picture” concept of the unit, designing challenging and respectful tasks for all, and meeting curriculum standards and requirements while maximizing student growth and individual success. Differentiation is based on sound research. It puts the learning needs of students at the center of instructional design (Tomlinson, 1999).

Differentiating Curricular Elements

Differentiated instruction usually implies modifications or variations in response to student needs in one or more of the following areas: content, process or product.

Content

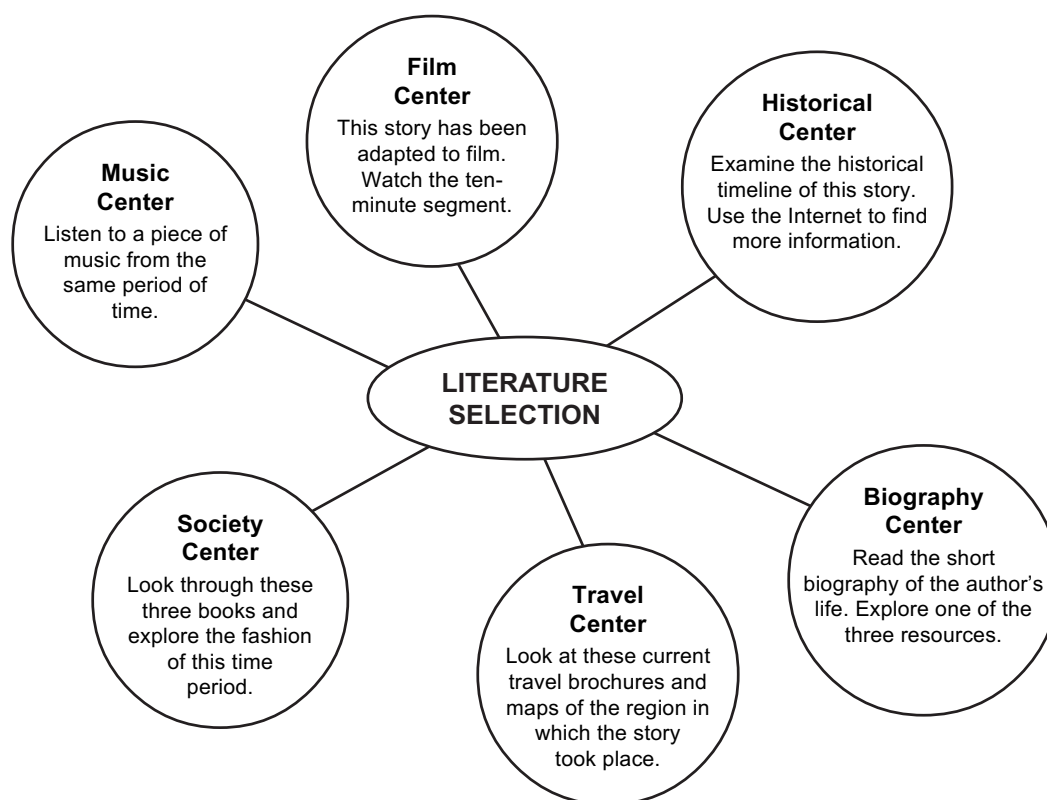
Content refers to the “input” of the unit: ideas, concepts, information and facts. It is what the student must know and understand as a result of the lesson. Content is differentiated by focusing on the unit’s most relevant and essential components and varying them to meet learners’ needs by providing them choices. For example, if some students need more time to grasp the essential skills needed for the unit, the teacher might provide them more direct instruction, more concrete examples and practice. Other students may quickly understand the concepts and need to be challenged by more complex activities (Berger, 1991).

Content can also be modified by providing a *variety* of texts: simpler or more advanced, authentic documents or adapted ones, electronic or print—or simply a variety of text types such as brochures, music, film, field trips, guest speakers, Total Physical Response Storytelling, etc. A learning center—a classroom area containing a collection of materials or activities designed to teach, reinforce, or extend a particular concept or skill (Center for Advanced Student Learning, 2001)—can be used to differentiate for content. *Learning Centers for Exploring Literature* (Figure 1) is one such example in which students gain background knowledge of a story’s setting, the historical and cultural perspectives in which it takes place, and the biographical background of the author.

Process

Process refers to the ways students make their own sense of the content or input. Process is the *how* of teaching. To modify the process, the teacher can apply a variety of flexible grouping strategies such as ability grouping, interest grouping, or grouping by learning profile. Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Theory¹ (Lazear,

There are six learning centers that will help you gain perspective into the piece of literature that we are reading in class. Examine the choices and visit four of the centers that interest you. Do the assigned activity for each center you choose, and fill in your self-reflection log. After everyone has completed the center activities within the time frame, you will be assigned to groups of three to discuss your findings and how this background knowledge is helping you better understand the piece of literature.



Self-Reflection Log

As you visit each center, respond to the following in the target language (only for the centers visited).

- **Music Center:** In three sentences describe how the music of this period sets the mood of the story. Include your impressions of the music and your reactions to the music.
- **Film Center:** In three sentences explain how this film segment helps you better understand the story. Include your observation of how that segment does or does not reflect the section you have already read.
- **History Center:** Identify three historical events that took place during this time period and tell how they might have impacted the author. You may include historical events such as discoveries, major events, famous people, scientific findings, etc. You may also identify other information you found on the Internet. Use a graphic organizer to represent your findings.
- **Society Corner:** In three sentences describe some of the clothing items and tell how they help you visualize the setting of the story. Draw one of the clothing items that most impressed you.
- **Travel Center:** If you were to visit this region, list three places you would go to and tell how they might influence your understanding of the story.
- **Biography Center:** Select three events in the life of the author and imagine how they may have influenced this story.

FIGURE 1: Learning Centers for Exploring Literature

2000), for example, can be used in designing instruction by attending to learners' different intelligences profiles. For example, in designing a unit around sports activities, a teacher could find reading selections about three different sports. In differentiating based on multiple intelligences theory, one group might practice demonstrating a sport from the target culture as a kinesthetic option, whereas another group could collaborate on designing a poster with the rules for the sport as a visual-spatial option. Yet another group could develop a presentation or report on a sport, thus touching on the verbal-linguistic intelligence (Theisen, 1997).

Process can also be differentiated by modifying the complexity or abstractness of tasks and by engaging students in critical and creative thinking. Other options include choice boards /menus, a differentiated strategy that provides options for learners to practice skills, try new products, and work with a variety of resources as they learn. The *Tic-Tac-Toe* menu (Figure 2) is an example of a skills-based set of practice options from which learners can choose in order to make sense of the structure section of a unit on the family. There are opportunities to practice questions, necessary verbs to enhance the topic, or vocabulary to support the unit. The students make three choices according to the contract. Having the autonomy to select what to do or how to do it gives them more responsibility and accountability for their learning because they must manage their time *and* select the options that will help

1 Verb Practice Exercises 2 & 3 in the workbook.	2 Question Practice Develop a survey to get information about number of brothers, sisters, etc. Ask 5 classmates.	3 Vocabulary Practice Family tree activity, page 59 in book.
4 Question Practice Create 10 questions you might ask someone in order to get details about her/his family.	5 Vocabulary Practice Design a crossword puzzle using the family and quantity vocabulary.	6 Verb Practice Design a quiz using the verbs in this unit.
7 Vocabulary Practice Watch the family video clip and do comprehension exercises 5 & 6.	8 Verb Practice Draw a picture to represent each one of the new verbs.	9 Verb Practice Create a song that will help you remember the question words.

Choose 3 boxes to form a tic-tac-toe. Choose skill activities that will help you practice these new concepts.

The boxes I chose are # _____, # _____, # _____

Signature _____ Class _____ Period _____

FIGURE 2: Tic-Tac-Toe Choice Board

ROLE	AUDIENCE	FORMAT	TOPIC
Customer	Hotel employee	Letter	Make a reservation for several nights. Include all details.
Hotel employee	Customer	Reply letter	Confirm reservation details. Include changes.
Customer	Hotel manager	Complaint	Demand compensation for problems and poor service.
Parisian real estate agency	Prospective renters	Real estate ad	Describe details of the apartments available for rent.
Students who want to study abroad	Study abroad organization	Application form for the program	Apply for a rigorous study abroad program.
Students who stayed with a family	Family members	Thank you note	Thank the family for the home stay and tell them about your return trip.

Choose one R.A.F.T. assignment. Pick up task sheet from the teacher in order to complete this writing performance. Use the Internet and other texts to research information you need to make your work authentic.

FIGURE 3: R.A.F.T. Assignment

them reach their full potential. From the teacher's perspective, the sophistication of menu creation follows a continuum from those that differentiate solely for *when* students choose to do the tasks to those that provide choices in the *what* and/or the *how* (Center for Advanced Student Learning, 2001).

Product

A product is the output of the unit or the ways that students demonstrate or exhibit their understanding of the content. Both Bloom's Taxonomy² (Heacox, 2002) and Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (Lazear, 2000) can be applied to the differentiation of products, providing greater challenge and variety in how students show what they have understood. Possibilities for varying products include role-plays, multimedia presentations, brochures, plays, songs, graphic organizers, posters, research papers, essays, news broadcasts, varied homework assignments and tests, stories, videos and *R.A.F.T.* (role, audience, format, topic) writing assignments, etc.

Figure 3, above, illustrates a *R.A.F.T.* assignment, a system for making sure students understand their role as writer, their audience, the format of their work, and the expected content of their writing. It is designed around unit objectives and standards and also provides an easy, meaningful way to incorporate writing into content-area instruction. Practically all *R.A.F.T.* assignments are written from a viewpoint other than that

of a student, to an audience other than the teacher, and in a form other than the standard essay. Four key ingredients are included in every *R.A.F.T.* writing assignment:

- R:** Role of Writer (Who are you?)
- A:** Audience (To whom is this written?)
- F:** Format (What form will it take?)
- T:** Topic + strong verb (What is your topic?)

Figure 3 provides samples of writing assignments students can choose from to demonstrate their understanding of the unit, *Traveling in France*. Learners select one row and create that written “product.” The teacher can set word limits or decide the format: word-processed, a hand-written card, student choice, etc.

What makes the *R.A.F.T.* such a popular activity with students is the variety and creativity involved. For each of these writing tasks the same scoring rubric can be used regardless of which row is selected, thus making it easier for the teacher.

Differentiating for Student Traits

Students connect better in their learning when their readiness level, interests, and/or learning profiles have been respected and valued (Gregory & Chapman, 2002).

Readiness

Teachers can differentiate for readiness by tiering or constructing tasks at varying degrees of difficulty and by making the task more or less familiar or complex based on the ability level of the learner (see Figure 4). A

<p>Topic: Clothing</p> <p>Language and Level: French III</p> <p>Key Concept(s): Students use clothing vocabulary in real world contexts. They are able to describe in detail, suggest clothing items to friends and customers, persuade others, compare and contrast, and encourage. Students apply different social registers for friends and work situations. Students know about the impact of the French fashion industry and are aware of the styles of clothing in other Francophone countries. Students know how to use currency. Students are able to research information about the clothing industry using the Internet.</p> <p>Key Understanding: Clothing is a form of expression in many cultures.</p>		<p>Targeted Standards:</p> <p>COMMUNICATION: Presentational Mode CULTURES: Products and Perspectives CONNECTIONS: Access to information, Other subject areas COMPARISONS: Concept of culture COMMUNITIES: Within and beyond the school</p> <p>Background: Students have studied clothing vocabulary and descriptive adjectives. They can use direct and indirect object pronouns when identifying clothing. They can persuade, encourage and suggest using commands, conditional, and subjunctive. Students are aware of the Francophone countries and are aware of the different styles of clothing and the roles of clothing in the culture and can relate this information to a diversity perspective. They have done a variety of activities and assessments. They have also done web quest research activities on the Internet. Therefore, these activities are designed for the readiness level of the students.</p>
<p>TIER 1 ASSIGNMENT (Complex and Abstract)</p> <p>Your group works for a business training institute. Your task is to write two role-play scenarios for students to use as a practice when dealing with a variety of customers in a clothing store. You are to set up each scenario and for each one, write a practice conversation between a “challenging” client and a vendor. These conversations would be used by business school students to practice appropriate interactions between a challenging client and a vendor. The conversations should encourage and persuade. Submit a written copy and be ready to present one conversation, without notes, as a model for the class.</p>	<p>TIER 2 ASSIGNMENT (Somewhat Complex & Concrete)</p> <p>Your group comprises the “Rules Committee” for a high school in Montréal, Canada. You have been assigned to write a small section of the school handbook that explains the school’s dress code. For this handout, write a brief general statement about the dress policy. Then write 12 school rules discussing the do’s and don’t of school dress. Describe the clothes that are acceptable or those that are not. Turn in a typed copy of the descriptions and the dress code for publication in the school handbook. Also create a poster with the 12 guidelines, and be ready to present it to the class.</p>	<p>TIER 3 ASSIGNMENT (Very Concrete)</p> <p>You work for an ad agency whose job is to create a mini catalog and a sales ad for one of the big department stores in Paris. Using magazine pictures, drawings and/or pictures from the Internet, create a mini-catalog with 12 clothing items. You decide on theme, age, or gender group. Describe each item using models from previous readings. Price the item in euros. Type the descriptions and neatly arrange the catalog to make it appealing to customers. Also create an ad promoting at least two of these items which are on sale. Be creative in your design, and be ready to present both the catalog and the ad to the class.</p>

FIGURE 4: Tiered Lesson Plan

tiered lesson or set of activities is a differentiation strategy that addresses certain standards, key concepts, and generalizations but allows several pathways for students to arrive at an understanding of these components based on their interests, readiness, or learning profiles. Tiered assignments focus on the same essential skills and understandings for *all* students—but at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. The tiered assignment in Figure 4 demonstrates how a product can be tiered for readiness. After gauging learners' readiness based on previous activities, homework assignments, quizzes, and tests, the teacher assigns students to one of three groups that best matches their ability level. All three assignments are evaluated using the same set of rubrics, thus making the assignments equitable and appropriately challenging to all.

Interests

In order to meet learners' diverse interests, the teacher can align key understandings of the unit with topics that intrigue students, encourage investigation, and give them a choice of products or tasks, including student-designed options. Figure 1, *Learning Centers for Exploring Literature*, demonstrates how content can be differentiated by interest. Each of the centers is designed so that students interact with different types of materials in order to explore and become more knowledgeable about a piece of literature. Students choose the centers that most interest them, therefore resulting in a more personal connection to the content.

Learning Profiles

A number of variables comprise a student's learning profile including the desire to work alone or in groups, preferring hands-on activities over developing logical-sequencing activities such as an outline, learning better when listening over viewing, and demonstrating a strong musical-rhythmic intelligence. Teachers can address these variables and create positive learning environments with flexible learning options; a choice of both cooperative, independent, and competitive learning experiences; and modification of the content, process, or product to align with the different learning styles of the students in the class (Center for Advanced Student Learning, 2001, Gregory, G. & Chapman, C. 2002, and Tomlinson, C. 1995). In Figure 2, *Tic-Tac-Toe*, student variables are addressed by including visual and musical activities as well as logical/mathematical, verbal/linguistic and interpersonal activities among the choices. In *Learning Centers for Exploring Literature* (Figure 1) students visit four of the six centers in order to explore the content with a deeper sense of understanding. Here students can view, read, respond with a graphic organizer, or listen to music. When personal learning styles are addressed and more interests are acknowledged, children begin to flourish, find meaning

in their learning, and want to engage in the process (Sizer, 1999).

Challenges of Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is a new way to look at each student as a truly unique individual whose talents, gifts, and abilities are important contributions to society. For this reason, it does require additional planning time in the beginning. Some teachers comment that differentiation takes too much time and, with so much to do in classrooms today, it is just much easier to have everybody doing the same thing (Willard-Holt, 1994). Other obstacles that hinder the implementation of differentiated instruction include colleagues and parents who may not understand why all learners are not doing the same thing at the same time in the classroom. Some may see the practice as being unfair and giving privileges and advantages to certain groups.

Moving towards the implementation of the philosophy of differentiation is a *long-term change process* which can be prepared for by examining the research and collecting anecdotal evidence from teachers who are implementing it (Tomlinson, 2000). Even though differentiating instruction *does* require some additional time and planning in the beginning, there are strategies for facilitating the effort.

- First, form partnerships and cohort groups with colleagues. Do a book study and/or try action research. These strategies offer participants opportunities to learn and apply new ideas in a professional, supportive setting. They promote an arena in which to problem-solve as a group, construct knowledge through research, and interact with new materials (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).
- Another strategy for implementing differentiated instruction is by beginning to try one new strategy at a time. Start small and remember that it is not necessary to differentiate every unit and every lesson. Design two possible products based on students' interests or learning profiles to use as the final assessment of a unit. Find three different kinds of ancillary materials at varying challenge levels, and decide which students will do which assignment based on past performance in the classroom. For a literature discussion, create a series of questions to ask students based on Bloom's Taxonomy. For example, have some questions that ask for facts, some that ask for comprehension or analysis, and some that ask for evaluation of the piece. Engage all learners by choosing students at different readiness levels to respond to the different types of questions. Soon patterns emerge and differentiation becomes easier and more apparent.
- Inform administrators and parents about differentiation and invite them to observe or help.

- When organizing a differentiated lesson, reflect on these questions:
 - What are the key concepts that every student must know, understand, and be able to do?
 - What is being differentiated? (the content, the process, the product)
 - How is this lesson being differentiated? (readiness, interests, learning profile)
 - Why is this lesson being differentiated? (motivation, access, efficiency)

As one sees the results of all students learning to their full potential, it becomes harder and harder to turn back to a “one-size-fits-all” perspective. A sense of calm, accomplishment, and joy from any student is one of the greatest gifts for a teacher.

Conclusion

When it comes to teaching, one size does *not* fit all. Students have different backgrounds, a range of ability levels, a variety of learning profiles, and an abundance of needs. By responding to these needs with a sound philosophy of differentiation, teachers have more authentic interactions with their students, and students are able to experience opportunities that will help them

reach their potential. Differentiation puts *students* at the center of teaching and learning. It is a common-sense, as well as research-based, approach to meeting the diverse needs of learners while promoting equity and excellence. It promotes a curriculum centered on critical thinking and acknowledges the uniqueness of each learner. As Emma Goldman (Petras, 1995), said, “No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure.”

¹ Gardner contends that there are several *intelligences* or ways of knowing besides the two that are most frequently represented in traditional educational settings: verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical. The others include intrapersonal, interpersonal, visual/spatial, body/kinesthetic, and musical/rhythmic.

² Bloom created a taxonomy for categorizing the level of abstraction of tasks that commonly occur in educational settings. From less abstract to more, categories are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

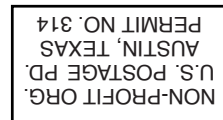
For Reflection

Differentiate What? Content—The input of the unit Process—How learners make sense of the content Product—How learners demonstrate what they’ve learned
Differentiate Why? Readiness—Students don’t all learn/progress at the same rate Interests—Learners, like teachers, have different interests Learning Profiles—Students vary in how they best learn and interact with knowledge

1. Reflect on your past practices in the classroom as they relate to the information in the chart above. Identify ways in which you are already differentiating.
2. Choose a lesson to examine by using two columns on a sheet of paper. In the left column indicate current strategies and activities. In the right-hand column, brainstorm how you could change or rearrange some of those activities and/or strategies in order to differentiate the lesson.
3. Develop a proposal for a school or departmental book study on differentiated instruction. Include a rationale and goals for the book study. Examine what you would include, what outcomes you would expect and the support you need to reach the group’s goals. Present this document to an administrator and see what happens.
4. Brainstorm a problem in your classrooms or school that might be solved by using differentiated instruction. After stating the problem, elaborate on what you need to do to respond to it. Explore how you might gather evidence of success and what you might reflect upon in order to improve the next time.

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